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ABSTRACT

This study considers some problems of reference found in figurative language, particularly in metaphor and metonymy. Analysis is based on the notion that the effects communicated by figurative language depend to a large extent on reference to more than one concept, experience, or entity, and that the presence of multiple potential referents enriches both cognitive and linguistic effects of written discourse. The text examined is a narrative entitled "Song of Solomon," by Toni Morrison, and the reference analyzed is that made to an earring. It is found that the apparently unique referent of the word is extended through metonymic and metaphoric elaboration so it acquires new cognitive senses; each use of the term in a new environment creates a unifying factor for interpretation of the entire narrative. It is concluded that while the Relative Theory of reference, which proposes that relevance is the only one necessary for satisfactory interpretation, and the principle of optimal relevance of referents are explanatory for brief, completed utterances, a complementary theory must be developed to explain a writer's use of multiple referentiality in longer narratives. (Contains 20 references.) (MSE)

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Aspects of Reference in Figurative Language

Anne Pankhurst

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ASPECTS OF REFERENCE IN FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Anne Pankhurst (DAL)

Abstract

This paper considers some problems of reference found in figurative language, especially in metaphor and metonymy. The particular effects communicated by figurative language depend to a large extent on reference to more than one concept, experience or entity at once. After considering examples of metaphor and metonymy in written text, I argue that the presence of multiple potential referents enriches the cognitive as well as the linguistic effects of written discourse. I consider the particular effects created by the development of reference over an entire narrative in Morrison's Song of Solomon, *in the light of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory. The reader's task, after initial assignment of reference, is made more complex by the accumulation of potential referents. Each use of a term in a new environment creates a unifying factor for interpretation of the entire narrative. I conclude that the importance placed by Relevance Theory on the optimal relevance of the first reference assignment is attenuated if a writer develops a metonym or metaphor in this way.*

1. Introduction

1.1 The pervasiveness of figurative language

Figurative language is used widely in spoken and written discourse. Nevertheless, metaphor and other figures of speech have traditionally been regarded as no more than linguistic decoration, an aesthetically pleasing addition in the domain of poetry and rhetoric. The development of cognitive studies of figurative language has led to a reconsideration of the function of metaphoric and metonymic language. Recent research demonstrates that metaphor is no mere ornament of diction, but in both conventional and novel forms represents common mental processes (Ortony et al. 1979, Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Lakoff 1987, Steen 1994). Studies of literary discourse (Lakoff and Turner 1989, Black 1993) show that the use of metaphor carries a certain view of the world, created by the author but representing more than an invented, fictional reality. Metaphor throws light on the characters' cognitive processes, enhancing and facilitating the reader's understanding.

These studies do not, however, examine the differences between distinct kinds of metaphor, or between metaphor and metonymy. The latter figure, although recognised by rhetoricians since the time of Aristotle, is not always separated from metaphor by some researchers (Gibbs 1992, Steen 1994). In this paper I shall address the question of whether metaphor and metonymy can be satisfactorily distinguished, defining a number of shared and distinct features. Pragmatic theories of metaphor comprehension (Searle 1969, Bach and Harnish 1979, Sperber and Wilson 1986) have tended to discuss aspects of referentiality in figurative language with brief exemplification from restricted discourse in word, phrase and clause. I shall use material from a longer narrative (Morrison: *Song of Solomon*) to demonstrate that an apparently constant referent changes in its context of use.

2. Metaphor and Metonymy

2.1 Differences

The linguistic, semantic and cognitive features of metaphor and metonymy enable us to make a number of distinctions between them. Metaphor is found in all word classes (Brooke-Rose 1958), and frequently in non-equative clauses with a copulative verb, of which a typical example is *Sally is an iceberg* (Searle 1979). In this kind of metaphoric construction, the qualities normally associated with an iceberg (for example, distance, coldness) are predicated of a person. Metonymy is chiefly found in the noun phrase, being realised by nouns with their determiners and modifiers. It is usually a definite referring mechanism, as in *The ham sandwich wants his check* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), although it is sometimes found in generic expressions, such as *From the cradle to the grave*. It is possible to classify a verb as metonymic, insofar as it is a verbalisation of the metonymic use of a noun. Bartsch (1987) notes the change of function of *carpet* as noun, referring firstly to a piece of material placed on the floor, secondly to the place where you stand when being ticked off by your boss, thirdly as a verb meaning to discipline someone.

An important difference (Black 1979, Lakoff et al. 1980, 1989) is that metaphor bridges two domains of experience or fields of knowledge, enabling transfer between domains which have hitherto been perceived and understood as separate, by a relation of analogy or resemblance. So, for example, the preposition *into* may indicate spatial location or direction in *He's gone into the garden*, and mental occupation in *He's really into soul music*. The noun complement of the prepositional phrase enables the domain of spatial location to be transferred to a location in the domain of musical experience, moving from physical to mental worlds. Metonymy, on the other hand, bridges two elements of one domain or field of experience, enabling inferential links to be made between material and abstract values of a term, but on the basis of contiguity rather than resemblance. A commonly used metonym such as *Watch out for that brown bomber jacket* uses clothes to stand for the wearer, but carries an implicature that the wearer has a certain number of overt non-material features worth noticing. Clothes are a salient feature of the person wearing them and can therefore stand for the person, albeit with further context-bound implicatures. This type of metonym is immediately understood to contain an attitudinal factor which the speaker wants to express covertly.

2.2 Shared features

Both metaphor and metonymy are found in prose and poetry as well as in everyday speech. Jakobson (1956) claimed that metaphor was the essential mark of poetic diction, metonymy the mark of realist prose, but Lodge (1977) shows that writers use both, either as linguistic features, or as organising principles of discourse. Lakoff and Turner (1989) demonstrate that where they are used together particularly rich literary effects are created. The figures can be novel, or conventionalised, as in the so-called "dead" metaphors such as *neck of the bottle*, and metonyms of place for power as in *Washington intervenes*.

A certain number of relational principles are common to the figures: both are substitutions of one term for another, achieve stylistic effects by the ellipsis of information, require shared knowledge in the sense that interpretation depends on choosing the most meaningful from among a range of potential referents. The writer using them assumes that the reader is able to carry out a process of contextualisation and inferencing. Both demonstrate that a single linguistic form may have more than one referent. Using these figures is a risk for communication, because of the gaps created between linguistic encoding, explicit and implicit semantic values, and cognitive effects. It has been claimed that the greater the number of potential referents, or the greater the number of ambiguities available to the reader, the richer and more valuable is the literary text (Soon Peng Su 1993).

3. Figurative language in written discourse

3.1 Word, phrase and clause

As is the case with literal expressions, metaphor and metonymy are to be found in various units of discourse, at word, phrase and sentence, and whole text levels. A single term, normally unambiguously referential in its literal sense, may be clearly figurative in its context of utterance; for example, wheel may be used to stand metonymically for a whole vehicle *(I've got my wheels tonight)* or metaphorically for a concept *(the wheel of fortune)*. In both these examples, a number of assumptions are made by the hearer. The conceptual notion of movement, the enabling power of a wheel to transport, hence to transform and be an agent of change, and the concept of circularity which enables return to the point of departure are included in the context of understanding. At this level, grammatical changes such as verbalisation occur, as in *to wheel in the next stage of the plan*. The change of function of the word occurs in either metaphoric or metonymic expressions, but in this case creates a clearly metaphorical extension of the referent. Since a figurative phrase contributes to the illocutionary force of the entire clause or sentence (Searle 1979) the metonymic use of wheels to stand for means of transport is limited to a physical domain. Its metaphoric extension in *to wheel in the next stage of the plan* enables the reader, by a process of inferential transfer between domains, to conclude that the designers of the plan are ready to implement it.

The need for an immediately available context to indicate the figurative force of a word is seen in the following example, which is a newspaper headline (Daily Telegraph, 18/11/94). The metonymic use of a place-name for a salient feature of that place allows the writer to attract the readers' attention, but knowledge of recent events in Ireland is a necessary enrichment, if disambiguation of the referent and correct assignment of reference are to be achieved.

3.2 Example: Dublin in Chaos

Interpretation of the phrase is grounded in a number of common assumptions. *Dublin* refers to the capital of the Republic of Ireland, but the word alone has no single referent. It may refer to the city of Dublin as a geographical entity and the *chaos* might therefore be caused by some general failure of infrastructure such as traffic lights, or electricity. Other readers may assume that some reference to social unrest is implied. Only those who know of a recent crisis in the government can assign reference correctly to the political turmoil caused by the resignation of the Prime Minister. The metonymic use of *Dublin* to stand for the Irish Government exemplifies the elliptical nature of metonymy. It is a bearer of information, its assertive force depends on knowledge of context, its multiple implicatures force the reader to choose between two or more potential referents. The writer assists communication by textual elaboration of the headline to *Dublin in Chaos as Reynolds Quits* and an explanatory first line to the leading paragraph: *Ireland faced fresh political turmoil last night after the Prime Minister, Mr. Albert Reynolds, resigned*. The reader rejects alternatives to the single correct reference because his interpretation is assisted by contextual explicatures. In the next section I shall discuss some of the problems caused by multiple reference, and consider some pragmatic theories which claim to account for how the reader or hearer solves the problem.

4. Some theories of reference

In seeking a theoretical explanation for the significance of reference in figurative language, we encounter the problem that a literal expression has a single, unique referent, and that literal language is the norm by which figurative language may be measured; the latter is considered aesthetically pleasing but deviant (Bartsch 1987, Wales 1989). I shall consider some theories of reference assignment which are less dismissive of figurative language (Searle 1969 and 1979, Bach and Harnish 1979) and then one which claims to be general enough to account for all language, whether literal or not (Sperber and Wilson 1986).

4.1 Speech Act Theory and attribution of reference in metaphor

In the interpretation of figurative language, the context of utterance, or the schema in which the speech act is produced, is of particular importance because of the gap between the apparent linguistic form of the terms, and their semantic value. Interpretation depends on a link, or bridge, being perceived in a shared context or schema. Double referentiality as in metaphor and metonymy is accommodated by Bach and Harnish (1979) who argue that the speech act schema (in their terms, a set of mutual contextual beliefs) applies to non-literal and indirect utterances as well as literal ones. Recognisable referents within a context are essential if the hearer is to make the correct inferences about the speaker's meaning and intentions in spite of opaque connections between what is said and what is meant. Thus, in the example given above, the use of *Dublin* with implied multiple referents is normal, and causes few problems if the reader shares at least some of the contextual beliefs of the writer, so that he is able to interpret the latter's intentions. Searle (1979) agrees that differences between sentence meaning and utterance meaning apply to figurative language just as much as to literal language.

If we analyse an idiomatic expression such as *to pay on the nail*, we note that the physical presence of *nail* is lost, and the understanding that immediate payment is meant is not clear from the surface form of the expression. The prepositional phrase *on the nail* has two different explicatures, one locative and literal, the other figurative and evident only when the phrase is conjoined in a clause with the verb *to pay*. Searle also claims that an utterance is interpreted by passing first through the literal meaning before reaching the figurative meaning. This argument is only partially supported by recent experimental evidence. Gibbs (1987) and Steen (1994) refute it, because their experimental evidence shows that metaphorical sentences are processed just as quickly as literal sentences, and there is no ground for assuming that literal meaning must be processed first. This refutation does not, of course, destroy the notion that a figurative expression may acquire meaning as part of the overall force of a speech act.

Speech Act Theory acknowledges that figurative language is interpretable in an environment defined by a known or shared context. It does not, however, enable the reader to prioritise among available choices when several equally suitable referents are available. I shall consider the adequacy of Relevance Theory in this respect.

4.2 Relevance Theory and reference

Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986), loosely based on Grice's (1967) Co-operative Principle, proposes that a single powerful criterion, relevance, is the only one necessary for satisfactory interpretation of an utterance. The principle of relevance enables the hearer to assign reference correctly in cases of double or multiple reference, where there is more than one candidate for meaning or when all available candidates fit the Gricean criteria. When choice between possible referents is crucial, Wilson(1992) claims that the principle of optimal relevance is a preferable explanation of the process.

Optimal relevance is defined as the first interpretation reached by the hearer consistent with the principle of relevance, e.g. giving greatest contextual effect for least effort, and therefore 'excludes the possibility that the hearer will be expected to recover, process and accept the wrong interpretation before lighting on the intended one.' (Wilson 1992:175). Bearing in mind that linguistic complexity, accessibility of context and inferential effort are all part of the interpretation process, we can test this principle by applying it to the metonymic phrase *Dublin in Chaos*, which has a number of possible referents.

Assuming firstly that some contextually shared knowledge is available, i.e. the reader has knowledge of Ireland, then the first step is to assume that the only knowledge available to reader is the general awareness that Dublin is a city. He may then choose an interpretation which has no relevance in the situation which the newspaper currently wishes to highlight. But it may be satisfactory to the reader so he stops, having reached a position of optimal relevance. 'Having found an interpretation which satisfies his expectations of relevance in a way the speaker might manifestly have foreseen, he need look no further.

The first such interpretation is the only such interpretation, and the one the hearer should choose.' (1992:176). This may be valid from the reader's point of view but it is easy to imagine circumstances where further effort leads to an interpretation matching the writer's intentions.

Gibbs (1992) proposes a possible explanatory theory for metaphor comprehension in his claim that the process of interpretation is time-conditioned. Although comprehension, recognition and interpretation of non-literal language may happen quickly (thereby satisfying Wilson's minimal effort requirement), appreciation of the effect of the figurative language may take a long time, and by implication be worth the extra effort. This is potentially important in the area of longer, literary text where a metonym or metaphor is developed as one of the unifying factors of the text.

An alternative assumption might be that the reader shares a certain amount of knowledge with the writer, for example, that the Irish Labour party has withdrawn from the Coalition and that the survival of the Government is threatened. As Bach and Harnish (1979) predict, the choice among the possible referents will be less effortful, and will lead to an immediate interpretation with new contextual effects, or new information. But will it necessarily be correct? Confirmation is provided by further contextual knowledge (the leading paragraph of the article) which clearly identifies the referent as political power represented metonymically by the name of the city. Wilson claims that the correctness of the interpretation does not matter, but if effective communication of intention is considered to be the goal of the writer, Wilson's view appears to disregard a central condition of communication, correct reference assignment. Wilson adds (1992:176 footnote) that there is no guarantee that the outcome of a non-demonstrative inference process will be correct, seeming to imply thereby that correctness is less important than the reaching of an optimally relevant interpretation. Thus, the process rather than the product of the assignment of reference is highlighted.

4.3 Choosing between referents

In spite of Sperber and Wilson's (1986) insistence that their theory explains the interaction of speaker and hearer, Wilson (1992) seems to attach more importance to the hearer's inferencing processes. The writer's problem is that his intentions may be more complex. For example, he may have intended to highlight any one, or several, of the following: that Dublin is a large city, disruption of electricity leads to chaos in a city, the Irish government has problems, the Government is indecisive. Or his intention may have been to provide an eye-catching headline with a view to selling the newspaper. On the other hand, a metonym is generally understood despite ellipsis of information, so the writer knows it will effect relevant communication. According to Sperber and Wilson's general theory, this accounts for the use of a metonym instead of a lengthy expression such as 'The Irish government has fallen and as a result the political situation in the capital city is in a state described as chaos because no one knows what to do next', which would demand unjustifiable extra effort for its effect. But we are still left with the problem created by an ellipted, figurative text: if there are two or more equally possible referents, how does the reader succeed in choosing correctly?

According to Wilson, the notion of contextual prominence or relative salience of the possible referents is a cognitive factor going beyond semantic explanations. Decisions as to reference assignment are founded on true, evidenced and informative grounds and achieved by retrieving an appropriate mental representation from memory by means of a short, plausible bridge. To these bases Wilson adds the idea that reference assignment is a process which is centred on rational expectations of relevance, through which the hearer is entitled to expect contextual effects from minimal processing effort. The reader, firstly, tests the most accessible information to see if it fits, and secondly, looks for another easily accessible context. Thus, the assignment of reference departs from a text-based solution and depends on the interaction between reader and writer, and the shared context which the reader explores.

This leaves us with the question of why a writer chooses to develop a term and change its referential value if the most accessible referent is the one intended. An initially literal use of a single word to convey a common concept can be developed into a complex series of figurative extensions which elaborate the concept and add other implicatures. I suggest in the next section that the writer of narrative fiction may exploit figurative language, in this case a metonym which evolves into metaphor, progressively. Wilson's principle of optimal relevance does not appear to account for the reader's need to add to the referent, redefine it in new contexts, and build on the initial effects. I shall consider the way in which Toni Morrison develops the term *earring* to mean, firstly, a single identifiable object, then by metonymic extension a person who wears it, and then by metaphoric extension transfers it into an abstract domain.

5. Referentiality in narrative fiction. Toni Morrison: *Song of Solomon*

5.1 The general significance of jewellery as adornment

The wearing of striking jewellery, as is well known, carries meaning over and above its literal manifestation of adding decorative elements to personal presentation. A reference to a piece of jewellery carries a wide range of contextual implicatures. Jewellery stands metonymically for the identity of the wearer, his or her attitude and lifestyle, the comparative degree of wealth or prominence, religious or social significance. This non-linguistic but overt communication extends across cultures, since most social groups use jewellery for identification of personal status. A writer has available a common concept which enables the reader to bridge contexts otherwise separated by a cultural gap. Toni Morrison highlights a special earring at several points in this narrative in order to construct a myth around the central character, Pilate. In doing so, she enables the reader who does not share knowledge or experience of the social context to access a world of experience represented by the object.

5.2 The use of 'earring' in *Song of Solomon*

This earring, made and worn by a woman called Pilate, stands explicitly for her personal identity, but also by implication her sex, class and race. Linguistically, it is realised as a noun phrase, often accompanied by definite determiners *(the, her, her mother's)* and modifiers *(wonderful, bright)*. It is decorative, ostentatious, has the attributes of brightness and sparkle, drawing attention to Pilate. This earring, like a phylactery, contains a special sacred word; the fact that Pilate wears it enhances her role and status, subverting the meaning of her poverty and marginalisation from society. Thus, it illustrates the move from literal to figurative, and by moving from one domain to another, from metonymic to metaphoric. The referent, apparently the same earring, is subject to change in the course of the narrative.

The earring is an essential part of Pilate's self-image, but it is also a focalising point for other characters' views of her. Her marginalised social status is visually represented by her black clothing, her physical awkwardness and her simple way of life. When the young Macon III, nicknamed Milkman, is brought to see her by his friend Guitar she has an overwhelming effect on the boy, for whom the earring, once seen, is the salient feature of an extraordinary woman:

> As they came closer and saw the brass box dangling from her ear, Milkman knew that what with the earring, the orange and the angled black cloth, nothing - not the wisdom of his father or the caution of the world - could keep him from her. (36-38)

At a point in the narrative when the relations between the protagonists have been established, Pilate's brother (Macon II) gives an account of the creation of the earring to his son Macon III. Pilate created the earring herself. It consists of a brass snuffbox which had belonged to her dead mother, containing a piece of paper on which her illiterate father (Macon I) had copied from the Bible the randomly-chosen name 'Pilate', the evidence of her ancestry and ethnic identity.

> Before they left the farm she'd taken the scrap of brown paper with her name on it from the Bible, and after a long time trying to make up her mind between a snuffbox and a sunbonnet with blue ribbons on it, she took the little brass box that had belonged to her mother. Her miserable days in the mansion were spent planning how to make an earring out of the box which would house her name. She found a piece of wire but couldn't get it through. Finally, after much begging and whining, Circe got a Negro blacksmith to solder a bit of gold wire to the box. Pilate rubbed her ear until it was numb, burned the end of the wire, and punched it through her earlobe. (167)

At this stage, she is a child, so the reader assumes that the making of the earring is to be taken literally. Nevertheless, we are already aware of a number of implicatures. Her choice of earring rather than necklace or ring ensures that her name will remain attached to her body for as long as she chooses. The stay in the house, with its intertextual allusion to the stay of Ulysses and his sailors with the enchantress Circe, represents the exile and imprisonment of the two children, deprived of the Edenic environment of their original home. Pilate's action of creating the earring affirms her identity and her rebellion against powerlessness. Definite determiners used in phrases - *the scrap of brown paper* and *the little brass box* - indicate that even before the flight, the paper and the box had great significance and were family treasures, whereas an initially indefinite object, *an earring* is created out of them. The lexical association of *planning, begging, whining*, together with the *gold wire* suggest that the box-earring will acquire the value of both container for treasure, and declaration that a unique treasure has been made. As metonym, it stands in the relationship of physical and mental contiguity to her sense of family and ancestry, her love for her dead parents, her strangeness and her personal identity as a vivid, flamboyant character with strong self-will. Pilate is identifiably different to all other people by the fact that she wears this single earring. The container comes to stand metonymically for the name written on the scrap of paper contained in it, and for the wearer. It has therefore a number of referents, and the reader must choose which one is salient in contexts of use.

The significance of the earring is increased at special moments of the narrative, notably at critical moments for Pilate's family history. One such moment is at the funeral of Pilate's granddaughter, Hagar. Pilate bursts into the service and asserts her authority, in order to express her grief in a traditional song. The effect of her entrance is foregrounded through the viewpoint of the others present, especially the mortician who is overwhelmed by the earring.

> She tilted her head and looked down. Her earring grazed her shoulder. Out of the total blackness of her clothes it blazed like a star. The mortician tried to approach her again, and moved closer, but when he saw her inky, berry-black lips, her cloudy, rainy eyes, the wonderful brass box hanging from her ear, he stepped back and looked at the floor. (317)

At this point, the earring acquires a number of new attributes which enhance its special prominence. It *blazed like a star*, it is *the wonderful brass box* against a background of *total blackness of her clothes* and *her inky, berry-black lips, her cloudy, rainy eyes*. The focalisation of the earring, twice placed in end-focus position in the description of Pilate, moves the reader's attention away from her dramatic physical appearance, as he remembers the figurative significance already created, and revises the referent which the word *earring* describes.

Finally, after Milkman has successfully found the family's original roots, and an explanation for the mysterious Sing, who was Pilate's mother, Pilate buries the earring with her father Jake's bones on a hill-top in the South. The earring is transferred from the physical domain to become a metaphor for the concept of family origins, but it is stolen by a bird. The earring's special identity disappears, at the moment when Pilate herself dies, thus destroying the figurative value of the object which has become an indefinite, devalued *something shiny*, a mere object.

'Should we put a rock or a cross on it?' Milkman asked.

Pilate shook her head. She reached up and yanked her earring from her ear, splitting the lobe. Then she made a little hole with her fingers and placed in it Sing's snuffbox with the single word Jake ever wrote .... Two of the birds circled round them. One dived into the new grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away. (335)

To conclude analysis of the linguistic form *earring* in this narrative, the apparently unique referent of the word is extended through metonymic and metaphoric elaboration so that it acquires new cognitive senses. The earring assumes new identities in the narrative. Concepts of power, leadership, charismatic personality, position in the family, the contrast between these and their loss, make this object an important means by which the reader reaches interpretation of the whole life of a poor black woman in the United States, which is not necessarily knowledge shared by all readers. By using an object first in its literal sense, then metonymically, Morrison adds to its value as a cohesive device. Metaphoric development by transfer into the domain of personal power accesses a new environment, transforming the character from a woman with rather strange personal characteristics into a model of the condition of her race. The earring, as an explicit and overt focalising device with multiple referential properties, enables the reader to interpret the significance of the character.

The data provided from *Song of Solomon* supports the conclusions reached in the analysis of the metonymic headline *Dublin in Chaos*. A wider dimension of interpretation is added as the reader's knowledge about the referent becomes more complex. Although Relevance Theory and the principle of optimal relevance are explanatory for brief, completed utterances, we need to look for complementary theories if we are to explain a writer's use of multiple referentiality in the context of longer narratives. In the case of metaphor and metonymy, interpretation and comprehension require more than an initial attribution of reference using the criterion of optimal relevance, if the reader is to perceive the full implicatures of multiple reference.

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